

Standard Tibetan

Standard Tibetan^[note 2] is a widely spoken form of the Tibetic languages that has many commonalities with the speech of Lhasa, an Ü-Tsang (Central Tibetan) dialect. For this reason, Standard Tibetan is often called **Lhasa Tibetan**.^[note 3] Tibetan is an official^[note 4] language of the Tibet Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China. The written language is based on Classical Tibetan and is highly conservative.

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Registers

Like many languages, Standard Tibetan has a variety of language registers:

- Phal-skad* ("demotic language"): the vernacular speech.
- Zhe-sa* ("polite respectful speech"): the formal spoken style, particularly prominent in Lhasa.
- Chos-skad* ("religious {or book} language"): the literary style in which the scriptures and other classical works are written.^[3]

Grammar

Syntax and word order

Tibetan is an ergative language. Grammatical constituents broadly have head-final word order:

- adjectives generally follow nouns in Tibetan, unless the two are linked by a genitive particle
- objects and adverbs precede the verb, as do adjectives in copular clauses
- a noun marked with the genitive case precedes the noun which it modifies
- demonstratives and numerals follow the noun they modify

Numerals

Unlike many other languages of East Asia and especially Chinese, another Sino-Tibetan language, there are no numeral auxiliaries or measure words used in counting in Tibetan although words expressive of a collective or integral are often used after the tens, sometimes after a smaller number.^[3]

In scientific and astrological works, the numerals, as in Vedic Sanskrit, are expressed by symbolical words.^[3]

Tibetan Numerals	༠	༡	༢	༣	༤	༥	༦	༧	༨	༩
Hindu numerals	०	१	२	३	४	५	६	७	८	९
Arabic numerals	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

Standard Tibetan	
བོད་སྐད་ , <i>Bod skad</i> / <i>Böké</i> <div>ལྷ་སའི་སྐད་, <i>Lha-sa'i skad</i> / <i>Lhaséké</i></div>	
Native to	Tibet (Western China), Nepal, India
Region	Tibet Autonomous Region, Kham
Native speakers	(1.2 million cited 1990 census) ^[1]
Language family	<div>Sino-Tibetan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tibeto-Kanauri ?<ul style="list-style-type: none">Bodish<ul style="list-style-type: none">Tibetic<ul style="list-style-type: none">Central Tibetan<ul style="list-style-type: none">Standard Tibetan</div>
Early forms	<div>Old Tibetan <ul style="list-style-type: none">Classical Tibetan </div>
Writing system	Tibetan alphabet <div>Tibetan Braille</div>
Official status	
<div>Official language in</div>	 China (Tibet Autonomous Region) <div> Nepal (Upper Mustang)<div> India (Ladakh)</div></div>
Regulated by	Committee for the Standardisation of the Tibetan Language ^[note 1]
Language codes	
ISO 639-1	bo (https://www.loc.gov/standards/iso639-2/php/langcodes_name.php?iso_639_1=bo)
ISO 639-2	tib (https://www.loc.gov/standards/iso639-2/php/langcodes_name.php?code_ID=447) (B) <div>bod (https://www.loc.gov/standards/iso639-2/php/langcodes_name.php?code_ID=447) (T)</div>
ISO 639-3	bod
Glottolog	tibe1272 (http://glottolog.org/resource/language/id/tibe1272) ^[2]
Linguasphere	70-AAA-ac

Writing system

Tibetan is written with an Indic script, with a historically conservative orthography that reflects Old Tibetan phonology and helps unify the Tibetan-language area. It is also helpful in reconstructing Proto Sino-Tibetan and Old Chinese.

Wylie transliteration is the most common system of romanization used by Western scholars in rendering written Tibetan using the Latin alphabet (such as employed on much of this page). Tibetan pinyin, however, is the official romanization system employed by the government of the People's Republic of China. Certain names may also retain irregular transcriptions, such as *Chomolungma* for Mount Everest.

Phonology of modern Lhasa Tibetan

The following summarizes the sound system of the dialect of Tibetan spoken in Lhasa, the most influential variety of the spoken language.

Vowels

Tournadre and Sangda Dorje describe eight vowels in the standard language:

Vowel phonemes of Standard Tibetan

	Front	Back
Close	i y	u
Close-mid	e ø	o
Open-mid	ɛ	
Open		ɑ

Three additional vowels are sometimes described as significantly distinct: [ʌ] or [ə], which is normally an allophone of /a/; [ɔ], which is normally an allophone of /o/; and [Ě] (an unrounded, centralised, mid front vowel), which is normally an allophone of /e/. These sounds normally occur in closed syllables; because Tibetan does not allow geminated consonants, there are cases in which one syllable ends with the same sound as the one following it. The result is that the first is pronounced as an open syllable but retains the vowel typical of a closed syllable. For instance, *zhabs* (foot) is pronounced [ʂʌp] and *pad* (borrowing from Sanskrit *padma*, lotus) is pronounced [pɛʔ], but the compound word, *zhabs pad* is pronounced [ʂʌpɛʔ]. This process can result in minimal pairs involving sounds that are otherwise allophones.

Sources vary on whether the [Ě] phone (resulting from /e/ in a closed syllable) and the [ɛ] phone (resulting from /a/ through the i-mutation) are distinct or basically identical.

Phonemic vowel length exists in Lhasa Tibetan but in a restricted set of circumstances. Assimilation of Classical Tibetan's suffixes, normally ‘i (འི), at the end of a word produces a long vowel in Lhasa Tibetan; the feature is sometimes omitted in phonetic transcriptions. In normal spoken pronunciation, a lengthening of the vowel is also frequently substituted for the sounds [r] and [l] when they occur at the end of a syllable.

The vowels /i/, /y/, /e/, /ø/, and /ɛ/ each have nasalized forms: /ĩ/, /ỹ/, /ẽ/, /ø̃/, and /ɛ̃/, respectively, which historically results from /in/, /en/, etc. In some unusual cases, the vowels /a/, /u/, and /o/ may also be nasalised.

Tones

The Lhasa dialect is usually described as having two tones: high and low. However, in monosyllabic words, each tone can occur with two distinct contours. The high tone can be pronounced with either a flat or a falling contour, and the low tone can be pronounced with either a flat or rising-falling contour, the latter being a tone that rises to a medium level before falling again. It is normally safe to distinguish only between the two tones because there are very few minimal pairs that differ only because of contour. The difference occurs only in certain words ending in the sounds [m] or [ŋ]; for instance, the word *kham* (Tibetan: ཁམ་, "piece") is pronounced [kʰám] with a high flat tone, whereas the word *Khams* (Tibetan: ཁམས་, "the Kham region") is pronounced [kʰâm] with a high falling tone.

In polysyllabic words, tone is not important except in the first syllable. This means that from the point of view of phonological typology, Tibetan could more accurately be described as a pitch-accent language than a true tone language, in which all syllables in a word can carry their own tone.

Consonants

Consonant phonemes of Standard Tibetan

	Bilabial	Alveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Nasal	m	n		ɲ	ŋ	
Stop	pʰ p	tʰ t	tʰ ~ tɕʰ ɖ ~ ɖɕ	cʰ c	kʰ k	ʔ
Affricate		tsʰ ts		tɕʰ tɕ		
Fricative		s	ɕ	ɕ		h
Approximant	w ~ ɥ	ɹ		j		
Lateral		ɭ	ɭ	ɭ		

The unaspirated stops /p/, /t/, /c/, and /k/ typically become voiced in the low tone and are pronounced [b], [d], [ɟ], and [g], respectively. The sounds are regarded as allophones. Similarly, the aspirated stops [pʰ], [tʰ], [cʰ], and [kʰ] are typically lightly aspirated in the low tone. The dialect of the upper social strata in Lhasa does not use voiced stops in the low tone.



Stone tablets with prayers in Tibetan at a Temple in McLeod Ganj



Pejas, scriptures of Tibetan Buddhism, at a library in Dharamsala, India

- 1. The alveolar trill ([r]) is in complementary distribution of the alveolar approximant [ɹ]; therefore, both are treated as one phoneme.
- 2. The voiceless alveolar lateral approximant [ɻ] resembles the voiceless alveolar lateral fricative [ɭ] found in languages such as Welsh and Zulu and is sometimes transcribed ⟨ɻ̥⟩.
- 3. The consonants /m/, /ŋ/, /p/, /r/, /l/, and /k/ may appear in syllable-final positions. The Classical Tibetan final /n/ is still present, but its modern pronunciation is normally realized as a nasalisation of the preceding vowel, rather than as a discrete consonant (see above). However, /k/ is not pronounced in the final position of a word except in very formal speech. Also, syllable-final /r/ and /l/ are often not clearly pronounced but realized as a lengthening of the preceding vowel. The phonemic glottal stop /ʔ/ appears only at the end of words in the place of /s/, /t/, or /k/, which were pronounced in Classical Tibetan but have since been elided. For instance, the word for Tibet itself was *Bod* in Classical Tibetan but is now pronounced [pʰøʔ] in the Lhasa dialect.

Verbal system

The standard Tibetan verbal system distinguishes four tenses and three evidential moods.^[4]

	Future	Present	Past	Perfect
Personal	V- <i>gi-yin</i>	V- <i>gi-yod</i>	V- <i>pa-yin</i> / <i>byuñ</i>	V- <i>yod</i>
Factual	V- <i>gi-red</i>	V- <i>gi-yod-pa-red</i>	V- <i>pa-red</i>	V- <i>yod-pa-red</i>
Testimonial	-----	V- <i>gi-ḥdug</i>	V- <i>soñ</i>	V- <i>bžag</i>

The three moods may all occur with all three grammatical persons, though early descriptions associated the personal modal category with European first-person agreement.^[5]

Counting system

Standard Tibetan has a base-10 counting system.^[6] The basic units of the counting system of Standard Tibetan is given in the table below in both the Tibetan script and a Romanisation for those unfamiliar with Written Tibetan.

Written Tibetan	Tibetan (Roman)	Arabic numerals	Written Tibetan	Tibetan (Roman)	Arabic numerals
གཅིག་	chig	1	ཉི་ཤུ་ཙ་གཅིག་	nyishu tsa ji	21
གཉིས་	nyi	2	ཉི་ཤུ་ཙ་གཉིས་	nyishu tsa nyi	22
གསུམ་	sum	3	ཉི་ཤུ་ཙ་གསུམ་	nyishu tsa sum	23
བཞི་	zhi	4	ཉི་ཤུ་ཙ་བཞི་	nyishu tsa zhi	24
ལྔ་	nga	5	ཉི་ཤུ་ཙ་ལྔ་	nyishu tsa nga	25
དྲུག་	drug	6	ཉི་ཤུ་ཙ་དྲུག་	nyishu tsa drug	26
བདུན་	dün	7	ཉི་ཤུ་ཙ་བདུན་	nyishu tsa dün	27
བརྒྱད་	gyed	8	ཉི་ཤུ་ཙ་བརྒྱད་	nyishu tsa gyed	28
དགུ་	gu	9	ཉི་ཤུ་ཙ་དགུ་	nyishu tsa gu	29
བཅུ་	chu	10	སུམ་ཅུ་	sum cu	30
བཅུ་གཅིག་	chugchig	11	བཞི་བཅུ་	ship cu	40
བཅུ་གཉིས་	chunyi	12	ལྔ་བཅུ་	ngap cu	50
བཅུ་གསུམ་	choksum	13	དྲུག་ཅུ་	trug cu	60
བཅུ་བཞི་	chushi	14	བདུན་ཅུ་	dün cu	70
བཅོ་ལྔ་	chonga	15	བརྒྱད་ཅུ་	gyed cu	80
བཅུ་དྲུག་	chudrug	16	དགུ་བཅུ་	gup cu	90
བཅུ་བདུན་	chubdun	17	བརྒྱ་	kya	100
བཅོ་བརྒྱད་	chobgyed	18	ཀླ་དང་ལྔ་བཅུ་	kya tang ngap cu	150
བཅུ་དགུ་	chudgu	19	ཉིས་བརྒྱ་	nyi kya	200
ཉི་ཤུ་	nyishu	20	སུམ་བརྒྱ་	sum kya	300

Scholarship

In the 18th and 19th centuries several Western linguists arrived in Tibet:

- The Capuchin friars who settled in Lhasa for a quarter of century from 1719:^[3]
 - Francesco della Penna, well known from his accurate description of Tibet,^[3]

- Cassian di Macerata sent home materials which were used by the Augustine friar Aug. Antonio Georgi of Rimini (1711–1797) in his *Alphabetum Tibetanum* (Rome, 1762, 4to), a ponderous and confused compilation, which may be still referred to, but with great caution.^[3]
- The Hungarian Sándor Kőrösi Csoma (1784–1842), who published the first Tibetan–European language dictionary (Classical Tibetan and English in this case) and grammar, *Essay Towards a Dictionary, Tibetan and English*.
- Heinrich August Jäschke of the Moravian mission which was established in Ladakh in 1857,^[3] *Tibetan Grammar* and *A Tibetan–English Dictionary*.
- At St Petersburg, Isaac Jacob Schmidt published his *Grammatik der tibetischen Sprache* in 1839 and his *Tibetisch-deutsches Wörterbuch* in 1841. His access to Mongolian sources had enabled him to enrich the results of his labours with a certain amount of information unknown to his predecessors. His *Tibetische Studien* (1851–1868) is a valuable collection of documents and observations.^[3]
- In France, P. E. Foucaux published in 1847 a translation from the *Rgya tcher rol-pa*, the Tibetan version of the *Lalita Vistara*, and in 1858 a *Grammaire thibétaine*.^[3]
- Ant. Schiefner of St Petersburg in 1849 his series of translations and researches.^[3]
- Theos Casimir Bernard, a PhD scholar of religion from Columbia University, explorer and practitioner of Yoga and Tibetan Buddhism, published, after his 1936/37 trip to India and Tibet, *A Simplified Grammar of the Literary Tibetan Language*, 1946. See the 'Books' section.

Indian indologist and linguist Rahul Sankrityayan wrote a Tibetan grammar in Hindi. Some of his other works on Tibetan were:

1. Tibbati Bal-Siksha, 1933
 2. Pathavali (Vols. 1, 2, 3), 1933
 3. Tibbati Vyakaran, 1933
 4. Tibbat May Budh Dharm, 1948
- Japanese linguist Kitamura Hajime published a grammar and dictionary of Lhasa Tibetan

Contemporary usage

In much of Tibet, primary education is conducted either primarily or entirely in the Tibetan language, and bilingual education is rarely introduced before students reach middle school. However, Chinese is the language of instruction of most Tibetan secondary schools. In April 2020, classroom instruction was switched from Tibetan to Mandarin Chinese in Ngaba, Sichuan.^[8] Students who continue on to tertiary education have the option of studying humanistic disciplines in Tibetan at a number of minority colleges in China.^[9] That contrasts with Tibetan schools in Dharamsala, India, where the Ministry of Human Resource Development curriculum requires academic subjects to be taught in English from middle school.^[10] Literacy and enrollment rates continue to be the main concern of the Chinese government. Much of the adult population in Tibet remains illiterate, and despite compulsory education policies, many parents in rural areas are unable to send their children to school.

In February 2008, Norman Baker, a UK MP, released a statement to mark International Mother Language Day claiming, "The Chinese government are following a deliberate policy of extinguishing all that is Tibetan, including their own language in their own country" and he asserted a right for Tibetans to express themselves "in their mother tongue".^[11] However, Tibetologist Elliot Sperling has noted that "within certain limits the PRC does make efforts to accommodate Tibetan cultural expression" and "the cultural activity taking place all over the Tibetan plateau cannot be ignored."^[12]

Some scholars also question such claims because most Tibetans continue to reside in rural areas where Chinese is rarely spoken, as opposed to Lhasa and other Tibetan cities where Chinese can often be heard. In the *Texas Journal of International Law*, Barry Sautman stated that "none of the many recent studies of endangered languages deems Tibetan to be imperiled, and language maintenance among Tibetans contrasts with language loss even in the remote areas of Western states renowned for liberal policies... claims that primary schools in Tibet teach Mandarin are in error. Tibetan was the main language of instruction in 98% of TAR primary schools in 1996; today, Mandarin is introduced in early grades only in urban schools.... Because less than four out of ten TAR Tibetans reach secondary school, primary school matters most for their cultural formation."^[13]

Recently, the Yushul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Intermediate People's Court sentenced Tashi Wangchuk to five years in prison on 22 May 2018. Part of the evidence used in court was a *New York Times* video entitled, "Tashi Wangchuk: A Tibetan's Journey for Justice" by Jonah M. Kessel. The accompanying text states, "To his surprise, he could not find one, even though nearly everyone living in this market town on the Tibetan plateau here is Tibetan. Officials had also ordered other monasteries and a private school in the area not to teach the language to laypeople. And public schools had dropped true bilingual education in Chinese and Tibetan, teaching Tibetan only in a single class, like a foreign language, if they taught it at all. 'This directly harms the culture of Tibetans,' said Mr. Tashi, 30, a shopkeeper who is trying to file a lawsuit to compel the authorities to provide more Tibetan education. 'Our people's culture is fading and being wiped out.'"^[14]

The most important Tibetan branch of language under threat is, however, the Ladakhi language of the Western Tibetan group, in the Ladakh region of India. In Leh, a slow but gradual process is underway whereby the Tibetan vernacular is being supplanted by English and Hindi, and there are signs of a gradual loss of Tibetan cultural identity in the area. The adjacent Balti language is also in severe danger, and unlike Ladakhi, it has already been replaced by Urdu as the main language of Baltistan, particularly due to settlers speaking Urdu from other areas moving to that area.

Machine translation software and applications

An incomplete list of machine translation software or applications that can translate Tibetan language from/to a variety of other languages.

- 藏译通 - Zangyitong, a mobile app for translating between Tibetan and Chinese.^{[15][16]}
- 青海弥陀翻译 – A Beta-version WeChat Mini Program that translate between Tibetan language to/from Chinese. (invitation from WeChat users only)
- 腾讯民汉翻译 – A WeChat Mini Program that translate between Tibetan language to/from Chinese.^[17]
- THL Tibetan to English Translation Tool - A webpage that annotates Tibetan text various English meanings and translations, with 10+ dictionaries integrated.^[18] A downloadable version is also available.^[19]
- 中国社科院 藏汉(口语)机器翻译 - A demonstrative website (slow in response) translating Tibetan to Chinese, developed by Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. It works well on Tibetan text from official Chinese News websites.^[20]
- Panlex - A multilingual translation website with a few Tibetan words.^[21]

See also

- Amdo Tibetan language
- Khams Tibetan language
- Languages of Bhutan

Notes

- Tibetan:** བོད་ཡིག་བར་ཆད་ཐུག་དུ་སྒྲུབ་བའི་ལས་དོན་ལུ་ཡོན་ལྷན་ཁང་གིས་བསྒྲིགས་, **Wylie:** *bod yig brda tshad ldan du sgyur ba'i las don u yon lhan khang gis bsgribs*; **Chinese:** 藏语术语标准化工作委员会
- Tibetan:** བོད་སྐད་, **Wylie:** *Bod skad*, **THL:** *Böké*, **ZYPY:** *Pögä*, IPA: [pʰøk̚ɛʔ]; also **Tibetan:** བོད་ཡིག་, **Wylie:** *Bod yig*, **THL:** *Böyik*, **ZYPY:** *Pöyig*
- Tibetan:** ལྷ་སའི་སྐད་, **Wylie:** *Lha-sa'i skad*, **THL:** *Lhaséké*, **ZYPY:** *Lasägä*
- Local languages such as Tibetan have official status "according to the provisions of the self-government regulations for ethnic autonomous areas" (http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/ethnic/2009-08/12/content_8559268.htm) ("What is the right of self-government of ethnic autonomous areas?" Updated August 12, 2009). With specific reference to the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), the use of Tibetan (no dialect specified, taken to mean all dialects) is given priority over the Han Chinese language (http://www.gov.cn/english/official/2009-03/02/content_1248355_4.htm) ("Fifty Years of Democratic Reform in Tibet", official Chinese government site, retrieved October 15, 2010).

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- [Online Keyboard for Tibetan](http://www.incks.com/en/tibetan.html) (<http://www.incks.com/en/tibetan.html>)
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